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# REVOLUTION OR EVOLUTION IN BELGIUM?

BY HENRY DE MAN

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OF all European countries, Belgium, that seemed the hardest hit by the war, has been the quickest to recover.

One year after the armistice, the output in all but a few industries had again reached the pre-war level. The number of unemployed workmen, which was about 700,000 in November, 1918, was less than 100,000 a year later. Emigration of labor is hardly above the pre-war rate. The cost of living is only about two-thirds of what it was a year ago, and in spite of the unfavorable foreign exchange, the downward trend continues.

The most characteristic fact of all is perhaps that the output of coal, which in most other countries is going down steadily, has continuously increased and is now practically as high as before the war. The latest returns (for October, 1919) show an output of 98.6 per cent of the monthly average, in 1913, in spite of the shortening of the shifts from 9 to 8½ hours. This figure is of double significance, both because coal mining is Belgium's economic mainstay, and also as an index of the return of transportation conditions, and of the demand for industrial fuel to a normal level.

The most striking feature of the condition of Belgium in 1919 is undoubtedly the absence of serious industrial disturbances and the immunity of the labor movement from extremist tendencies. Although the Belgian Labor Party, now the biggest single political force in the country, is outspokenly socialistic, and has a historical record as the initiator of the national strike for political purposes, as actually conducted in 1893, 1902 and 1913, the industrial life of the nation has been much less disturbed of late than that of any other industrial country. Bolshevism, Spartacism, Communism, I. W. W.ism are unknown in Belgium. There is

not a single group, paper, or known industrial, whom these extreme manifestations of social discontent might claim as their exponent.

As industry had been practically at a standstill for the duration of the war, the readjustment of wages to the cost of living after the armistice has been more abrupt and radical than elsewhere. The recent progress of trade unionism has been faster than even in England, the unions having increased their membership by about 400 per cent in one year. Collective bargaining on a national scale has been introduced in the two main industries, mining and metallurgy, in which it was practically unknown before the war. It has become the rule in most others. The eight hour day prevails where the nine or ten hour day existed until 1914. The railroadmen, who, until 1918, had been deprived of the right to form trade unions, are now almost to a man affiliated with the union movement. The national Government, which before the war had practically refused recognition to the labor unions, now consists of their representatives to the extent of one third, and stands pledged to a policy of "recognizing the participation of the labor unions in the management of industry."

The plural voting system has been suppressed. Consequently, the Conservative (Roman Catholic) party, which had governed uninterruptedly for twenty-eight years, has been deprived of its majority. The Socialists, who had been outcast until 1914 so that none of them was allowed to become a mayor, now hold the Presidency of the Chamber of Deputies, and four out of the twelve seats in the Cabinet. This Cabinet only came into existence after its programme had been endorsed by a regular convention of the Labor Party.

The story of how such a revolution could be accomplished in quiet and orderly fashion, together with the actual reconstruction of a little country that, a year ago, was faced by problems much more acute and complicated than those of the neighboring nations, may interest those Americans who are anxious to see democracy made an instrument of social progress and readjustment.

I, for one, am quite prepared to admit that I did not believe in the possibility of such a speedy and easy recovery of my country when, in November, 1918, I returned with the Belgian army on the heels of the retreating Germans,

who had occupied practically all of it for more than four years. I need not describe here the extent of the damage done by the invaders, especially to some of our main industries, like the textiles, which had been almost completely deprived of their machinery. It seems to me that too much attention has been paid by public opinion at large, especially in America, to the spectacular side of the devastation that followed in the wake of the German armies, whilst some other, much more important consequences of the occupation were ignored.

The sensationalism and atrocity-mongering of the newspapers has resulted in giving the general public abroad a quite false idea of what the real problem of Belgium's reconstruction eventually proved to be. In this highly industrialized country, with nearly eight million inhabitants living on 11,000 square miles, that has to import more than half of its food in exchange for manufactured products, the reopening of the international tradeways upon which the country's prosperity mainly depends, was an immeasurably more difficult and more complicated task than to rebuild destroyed villages or to reequip an agricultural, self-supporting nation like, say, the Serbs. There were 700,000 unemployed workmen, with no machinery and no raw materials to set them to work on. There were all the problems connected with the sudden withdrawal of the German currency, which had been used for four years, and the enormous discount on the foreign exchange that followed the importation *en masse* of food and manufactured goods.

But one task was bigger even than the repairing of the insolvent fabric of a modern manufacturing nation's economic life after four years of coma. That was the psychological readjustment needed, the curing of the nation's soul of the effects of four years of idleness, pauperism, under-feeding, political oppression, and intellectual isolation.

What made the latter problem the crucial issue in Belgium was the unparalleled condition of the country under German occupation. With the exception of the occupied industrial districts of the North of France, no other country has been through an ordeal so destructive of the popular *morale* as Belgium. In an agricultural country under enemy occupation, life goes on as usual in the rear of the armies, and the greater the demand for food the greater the activity and prosperity. So it was in the agricultural

districts of Belgium, with the exception of the small part that had been devastated by warfare. The value of agricultural land was doubled or trebled, and every farmer became a profiteer at the expense both of the Germans and of the industrial population, and ultimately a miniature *nouveau riche*. But fully two-thirds of Belgium's population live in cities or great industrial centers and depend on industry and trade. In some instances, they were forced into idleness by the interruption of international trade. But in most cases, they stopped work because their production would have helped the Germans. It is no exaggeration to say that three quarters of a million of Belgian workers were on strike against the German occupants for four years, in spite of every inducement to work for them, and of the terrorizing effect of the deportations—the biggest and most prolonged general strike in history. This involved all the railwaymen and transport workers, most metal and textile workers, and, to a smaller extent, the miners, as the output of coal had been voluntarily reduced to the minimum needed for home consumption.

Few things are more amazing in the history of the World War than the almost superhuman tenacity with which these masses continued their "passive resistance," and the unreasoning, and to all appearances unreasonable hope with which they clung to the idea that "they" would have to go—some day. Ignorance of all that happened elsewhere was complete, except for what the Germans would tell. Besides, with the Government gone abroad, the papers suppressed, no books or magazines admitted but from Germany, political activities prohibited, the frontiers fenced off, and communication between the various cities and parts of the country made practically impossible, individual and local isolation had been carried as far as it was possible for any power to carry it. Yet the powerful machine of German administration, designed to bend the will of a nation that had been thus reduced to atoms, failed. Surely a surprising indication of the power of a collective human will!

This power, however, after the early stage, when the initial active impulse to resist was formed and heroically asserted itself, naturally became a power of inertia. In view of what we know of the strength of human nerves, it would have been impossible, for example, for the mass of Belgian workmen to remain voluntarily unemployed for

four years, and resist the continual attempts of bribing and bullying by the occupant, in the face of increasing starvation and misery, if the power of the original resolution had not been supplemented by the supreme power of habit. After four years of heroic idleness, the hero had become an idler.

Still there was no truth in the charge that was made by some of our employers and capitalists after the armistice that most workmen would rather go on drawing the unemployment pay and do nothing than to make a few francs more by going to work. The best proof of the falsity of the charge was that, in those earlier stages of industrial reconstruction when some short-sighted employers tried to speculate on the misery of the masses, tens of thousands of workmen were emigrating into France and Holland, where they would get decent wages for hard work.

The truth of the matter is that, immediately after the withdrawal of the Germans, and the return of the Belgian army, everybody, the workmen included, wanted but to enjoy himself. Since there was not much to feast on, the feasting was soon over; and the immense majority of the workmen then had no greater desire than to go back to work for a living wage. The labor unions took a leading part in encouraging the resumption of work, whilst demanding higher wages to meet the increased cost of living, and shorter hours to avoid still further weakening of the debilitated men's strength. They had no real difficulty in getting the men started wherever conditions were decent; but the long enforced idleness, the consequent loss of skill, the nervous strain of four years of anxiety and moral quasi-prostration, the weakening of bodies through underfeeding, made themselves felt once work had been resumed, and accounted for a reduced output. This reduction of working power, both physical and nervous, affected all classes alike.

The real tragedy of Belgian life under the occupation was the absolute intellectual stagnation. It was as though people had gone asleep in the fall of 1914 and waked up again, after bad dreams, in the fall of 1918. Those Belgians who have been with the army or lived in England or France as refugees, all declare that they felt, after the first joy of returning to the old place and the old people, the same shock of disappointment at finding that nothing had changed. Nothing could better bring home to them the importance of the changes in the fermenting world in which they had them-

selves been living these four years, than the contrast between their own mentality and that of the people who had stayed in Belgium. Even to a moderately sensitive person, this contrast would reveal itself painfully at every step, at every word, in every trivial little incident that would bring the "homestayors" and "those of the Yser" in contact with each other. To me, the most pathetic thing in Belgium after the return in 1918 was neither the sight of destroyed homes—I had become used to that sort of thing since 1914—nor that of the empty factory walls or wrecked blast furnaces—I knew they would soon come back to life. It was in the faces and in the eyes of the people who had lived there, faces and eyes that spoke of getting four years older—and what a four years!—without having *lived* them.

The immediate effect of the absolute ignorance of what had been going on in the world—save a few outstanding facts about the military situation, which the Germans could not have withheld from them—was that, after the first few weeks of rejoicings, bitter dissatisfaction with the "fruits of the victory" set in. This was long before President Wilson's surrender at Paris, and had nothing to do with the disappointment in the failure to conclude a democratic peace that spread in progressive circles all over the world. The dissatisfaction of the Belgians was due to ignorance more than to knowledge, and originated in the narrowness of a national outlook that had not been widened since August, 1914. It had shrunk instead, since the silent suffering under German occupation had transformed the fervent hope of the restoration of Belgium's freedom into a fixed area, which was as exclusive and narrow as it was intense. In their ignorance of all that had happened since 1914 to widen the character and the issues of the conflict, the Belgians of 1919 still viewed it as they had viewed it in 1914. Then France and England had come to Belgium's help. They were victorious now, and so they would see to it that everything was restored to the same state as before. The mass of the people undoubtedly believed that once the Germans were gone, Belgium would be immediately restored, so that everybody might go back to work. They thought that Belgium's allies would have no other concern than to provide them with everything they would need, which they felt sure would be sent along in myriads of trainloads and barges from places where it had been kept in store behind the front.

They knew nothing of the problems that had to be faced in every other country, and were unable to look at Belgium's restoration as what it had become, namely, one part of the reconstruction of the whole world.

These are but a few indications of the very low national "*morale*" that prevailed in the winter of 1918-'19. The main causes of discontent were the practically undiminished extent of the unemployment, the differences over wages and labor conditions when work was resumed, the antagonism between the industrial population and the profiteering farmer, the difficulties which the Government encountered with its necessary policy of price fixing and licensing the exterior trade, and last but not least, the old conflict about the use of the Flemish and French languages, which the Germans had embittered and poisoned by using Flemish as a means to foster dissension.

The effect of all this was aggravated by a general lowering of the level of public morality, similar in many of its causes and manifestations to what happened in Germany at the same time. It was marked by a distinct relaxation of the rules of sexual ethics and a formidable increase of all forms of criminality, from petty larceny to armed robbery and common murder. The intensity of the prolonged nervous strain, combined with underfeeding, probably had a good deal to do with it. Its main cause, however, seemed to be the German policy of food requisition and distribution. The Germans requisitioned the main agricultural products, using most of them for their own purposes, and leaving the rest on the Belgian market, without fixing maximum rations, so that most of it went to the rich, who bought it at exorbitant prices, instead of to the neediest. This resulted in extensive smuggling and stealing. Smuggling, and trading in goods and food, stolen from the German commissariat or obtained by bribery from German soldiers and officials, became a regular institution. Everybody did it. The food thus obtained made life a little more bearable. Quite a number of people made a regular living by smuggling. Unemployment, misery and the presence of a large army of occupation also encouraged prostitution. Looting of German dumps of every description was a normal occurrence in all parts of the country for several weeks after the Germans had gone. The discharged soldier, who often had become an unemployed workman, with very inadequate allowances,



further complicated the problem. Hatred of the profiteering farmer frequently tempered popular condemnation of the attacks and robbery of farms by armed bands, which were a daily occurrence the winter before last.

The general demoralization also extended to the army, where complaints about undue slowness in demobilization and inadequate allowances for the discharged soldiers were universal, while most of the officers made matters worse by trying to maintain by force an exterior discipline which the soldiers felt had become unnecessary since the fighting had ceased.

To sum up, there was such an amount of incendiary material accumulated in Belgium in the earlier part of 1919, that a spark might have set the whole country aflame. Everyone who was familiar with the temper of the Belgian people at that time, especially that of the workman and the soldier, knew that if anyone not altogether unfit to act as a leader, with some semblance of an organization behind him, had got up then and preached the gospel of revolution and proletarian dictatorship, and if the official leaders of the Labor Party and the trade unions had but kept neutral in the matter, a seizure of power by the masses would have been as easy in Brussels as it was in Petrograd.

Belgium was ripe for Bolshevism; but there were no Bolshewiki. The reason was that the Labor Party, which represents the mass of Belgian labor to a greater extent even than German Social-Democracy ever represented the German proletariat, or than the British Labor Party now represents the British worker, would not have it. The party leaders deliberately put a brake on all manifestations of social discontent save those that were useful for the orderly reconstruction of the country as a democratic industrial commonwealth.

What made this task comparatively easy for the Labor Party was that it had not been split, like the Socialist and Labor organizations in all other countries, over its policy in the war. Perfect unanimity had prevailed, from the 3rd of August, 1914, on, about the duty of the Belgian proletariat to take part in the defence of the national independence. Some slight differences of opinion had occurred in 1917 and 1918, about the desirability of supporting the proposed Stockholm conference, a minority being in favor, while the majority claimed that it was useless and dangerous to meet

the German majority Social-Democrats as long as they supported the war policy of their government. The same cleavage of opinion occurred after the armistice when the question of resuming international relations came up. But this was a mere difference of opinion in tactics which never affected the fundamental issue.

Perhaps it is useful to say here that the Belgian Labor Party is not a party in the ordinary sense, not a mere political organization. It is in fact a federation of every form of militant labor organization in the country, with a socialistic programme, aiming at public ownership of all means of production. Besides a nucleus of purely political and educational organizations, it consists in the main of trade unions, cooperative consumer's organizations, and mutual insurance societies. Although there is a small sprinkling of bourgeois intellectuals among its leaders—represented by 17 out of 70 of its representatives in the Chamber of Deputies—it is purely a labor body. The average workingman belongs to the Labor Party in many more ways than are expressed by his vote or his political affiliation. His trade union, the cooperative store where his family buys, the "Mutual Benefit" society that insures him against unemployment through sickness, the library where he gets his books, the fire and life insurance society where he carries a policy, the "labor bank" in which he deposits his savings, the theatrical or musical club where he spends his Sunday evenings, the café and the cinema of the "*Maison du Peuple*" which he haunts—all that and a good deal more, is part and parcel of the Labor Party which is the living embodiment of all his aspirations, political and otherwise, as a workingman. This is another reason why the prestige of the Labor Party and its hold on the masses have increased during the war. Although most of the trade unions were "asleep" those four years owing to the stagnation of industry, their leaders were active as labor representatives on the many boards and committees that were responsible for the local and national relief work and the payments of grants to the unemployed. The cooperative consumers' societies, on the other hand, played an essential part in the distribution of supplies. The successful endeavors of the cooperative bakeries in keeping the price of bread low, against the wishes of the private bakers, would alone have justified their existence. No wonder that the "*Maison du Peuple*," as the headquarters of these co-

operative associations, which also harbor most of the other forms of labor organizations, are called, were more than ever the rallying points of Belgian Labor. More than 600 new cooperative societies were formed during the war. To-day they are, in spite of the lack of capital which the extension of their business had made them feel more acutely, more numerous and more prosperous than ever.

When the Labor Party resumed its political activity after the evacuation of Belgium by the Germans, it had to choose between two policies. It could have used the widespread discontent, due to the causes which I have attempted to sketch, to increase its power as a party of opposition to the present social order. Without assuming any responsibility itself in the reconstruction of the country, its criticism of the ruling classes and parties would have been all the more effective as the problem of reorganizing the economic fabric was obviously insoluble without the goodwill and support of the working class. It can hardly be doubted that by following this course it would have precipitated an upheaval leading to some form of proletarian dictatorship. Even if the ruling classes had had the power to prevent this—which I do not think they had, as they were demoralized and disunited, and could not have relied on the army—they would probably have been glad to let things go ahead that way, and see the Labor Party alone try to extricate itself from the mess of national disorganization and carry the blame of its probable failure.

The alternative policy, to which the Labor Party unanimously and practically without discussion committed itself, as the logical outcome of its attitude during the war, was to renounce the propagandistic advantage of a purely critical attitude, and to collaborate with the other parties in reorganizing the country, while using its power to secure as square a deal for labor as circumstances would permit. Consequently three socialists, acting as delegates of the Labor Party, entered the Cabinet, together with representatives of the two "bourgeois" parties. Vandervelde took the portfolio of Justice, Anseele that of Public Works, and Wauters that of Industry and Labor, to which was attached the administration of food, fuel and supplies. The latter department was by far the most important and carried the heaviest burden in the reconstruction work. A good deal of the credit for its success is due to the energetic and businesslike

way in which Minister Wauters acquitted himself of his task.

The Labor Party thus gave its support to the Government after agreement had been reached on a programme of reforms which had been on the labor platform for years. They were:

1. The suppression of plural suffrage, with the granting of a single vote to every male citizen of 21 years of age, the question of woman suffrage to be decided later by the new constituent assembly. This was carried out immediately by ministerial decree, in an extra-legal way for which the lack of constitutional validity of all legislative authorities since the war was quoted as a justification.

2. The suppression of article 310 of the Penal Code, which puts extra penalties on acts of violence or intimidation when perpetrated in connection with labor disputes. This law is still on the statute book, but is no longer applied, and the new Government stands pledged to its abrogation.

3. The granting of unlimited right of coalition to all state employees. This includes all the railway workers, who had been thus far prevented from forming militant unions. This was done immediately (granting them the basic eight-hour day at the same time) with the result that the railwaymen are practically all organized with the Labor Party, or "red" unions.

In addition to these reforms, the Ministry for Industry and Labor played a great part in reorganizing industry on a new basis, with collective bargaining and direct representation of the labor unions in industrial councils for the prevention and settlement of labor disputes as its cornerstones. These industrial councils now exist, both nationally and locally, in the coal-mining and metallurgic industries, in the Flanders textile industry, at the port of Antwerp, and in many other instances. They succeeded in averting or settling a large number of labor disputes, so that the total number of strikes in Belgium in the first seven months of 1919 (the latest figure available) was only 194, involving 55,370 workmen, a very low total considering the circumstances; 108 of these strikes were settled by conciliation, and a large number of potential struggles involving a very much greater number of men were averted in the same way through the intervention of the Government.

Collective bargaining with government support resulted

in the acceptance of the eight-hour day (though mitigated in some cases by gradual introduction extending over a period of one year), the minimum wage principle and national wage tariffs, in such basic industries as mining and metallurgy, with many other applications in smaller departments.

Simultaneously, the "red" labor unions (the usual designation of the "socialist and independent unions" directly or indirectly affiliated with the Labor Party as opposed to the comparatively insignificant Roman Catholic or neutral unions) went ahead with gigantic strides. Their national federation, which comprised about 160,000 members at the outbreak of the war, mustered more than six hundred thousand in November last.

The political progress made by Belgian labor, as exemplified by the general elections held in November last, is none the less important for not being as much in the nature of a landslide as the headway made by the trade unions. This is due to the fact that before the war, the labor unions had remained somewhat behind the development of the political and cooperative strength of labor. The fact that the number of Socialist deputies increased from 34 to 70 is due in large measure to the suppression of plural suffrage whilst the same circumstance makes a comparison of the number of votes with the previous returns impossible. On the other hand, the Belgian system of proportional representation, with its extremely minute adjustment of the number of deputies to the number of voters for each party, makes the shifting of power from one party to another very much less sudden and catastrophic than it would be under similar circumstances in England or the United States. But even so, the result of the elections marks a fundamental change in national politics. It has deprived the Roman Catholic (conservative) party of the majority which it had held for twenty-eight years. It severely crippled the Liberal (bourgeois progressive) party. It gave the Labor Party more than one-third of the votes and of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Out of a total of 1,743,157 votes the Labor Party polled 644,499, the Catholic conservatives 618,505, the dissident Catholics 45,197, the Liberals 309,463, and the smaller groups together 124,493. As no party thus had a majority, the question of participating in the new Government naturally arose again before the Labor Party, which

had become the umpire of the situation. The definite formation of the Cabinet was postponed till after the special convention of the Labor Party, which assembled on November 30th, 1919, and before which the tentative programme evolved by the members of the old cabinet was put for approval. The problem was solved in the same spirit as when the first "reconstruction cabinet" was formed after the armistice. Perhaps the most enjoyable feature of the new conditions was that the old issue between "clericals" (the Roman Catholic party) and "anticlericals" (the Liberal and Labor parties) was dead as the natural consequence of the disappearance of the Catholic majority. Some of the Liberals tried to revive it, as they desired to form an "anti-clerical" cabinet with the Labor Party, but they found no support with the latter. This has cleared the road for a Government with a programme limited to problems of economic and administrative reconstruction, in a democratic spirit and along constructive lines. The Convention of the Labor Party, after two days of discussion, remarkably free from heat or personal animosity, decided with a majority of 1,415 votes to 146 in favor of supporting the cabinet and delegating four representatives to be its members, the new Socialist minister being Jules Destree, receiving the portfolio of Education. The minority, whilst disclaiming any extremist or destructive tendencies, opposed participation in the Government on the ground, mainly based on doctrinal consideration, that the Labor Party would have a stronger influence in favor of social reform if it remained in the opposition.

The present Government programme has taken over from the previous cabinet the suppression of article 310 of the Penal Code, (the anti-picketing clause) which the former Government had failed, for technical reasons, to carry out. In addition, it stands pledged to the introduction in the Constitution of the same form of equal male suffrage that was already in operation at the last election, whilst removing all constitutional obstacles to its extension to women. It has further promised legal enactment of the resolutions of the international Labor Conference, especially as regards the eight-hour day, and tentative nationalization of the coal mines in the new Campine coal district, as an experiment by future policies in that direction may be decided.

With regard to the settlement of labor disputes, it has

committed itself to the principle that "organized labor should be given a right to cooperate in the management of industry." On other important issues, like the democratic reform of the army and of the system of taxation, provision for the housing of workmen, etc., its programme is rather vague, and the effort to conciliate the interests of various classes without commitment to anything too definite is visible. It is felt by everybody, of course, that the future policy of the Government will correspond to what the balance of power, especially of industrial power, will be in the country. But the outlook of the Labor Party is all the more hopeful as the whole situation is now dominated by the fear of the other parties to see the next elections give a square majority to labor should the Government fail to satisfy the present expectations of the workers, who form the majority of the population, and the largest homogeneous political power in the country.

As it stands now, the Belgian record is remarkable enough as an experiment in constructive industrial democracy to deserve being heeded abroad, not only by Democrats and Socialists, but by all those who are interested in the solution of the dilemma: Revolution or Evolution?

HENRY DE MAN.